

**South Downtown Advisory Group
Meeting #7 October 20, 2005
Draft Meeting Notes**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chinatown/I.D. South Edge of Core

1. Look carefully at height limit changes in the area roughly south of Weller Street, including fine-grained analysis of bulk and shadow impacts.
2. Consider height changes oriented only to residential uses, and consider allowing the developer to decide where ground-floor residential use would be appropriate. The City could also define where ground-floor residential would be permissible.

Japantown Hill (IDR zone)

3. The discussion suggested that commercial uses at ground floor be kept optional in the IDR zone, although in areas like Main Street west of 6th Avenue it would be beneficial in aiding revitalization.

Japantown 4th/5th Avenue Vicinity

4. The advisors indicated support for considering substantial changes in zoned height in this transit hub vicinity, to incentivize residential uses (with commercial uses at the ground floor) in this current "no man's land."
5. Advisors spoke in favor of extending a denser/taller IDM zone east across 5th Avenue to include at least properties bordering on the east edge of 5th Avenue.
6. The advisors did not recommend a specific maximum height limit.
7. The City should more closely study what will work, regarding building bulk, streetscape and architectural character.

Pioneer Square

8. Advisors' input supported a growth-at-the-edges concept, where key sites offer chances for a critical mass of new population that would encourage other positive actions in the neighborhood.
9. The limited number of vacant sites available in central Pioneer Square is seen as offering fewer chances to create a critical mass of change, with more challenges to successfully incentivizing change. The City should more closely examine strategies to make rehabilitation and/or redevelopment more feasible in central Pioneer Square.
10. The advisors identified a need for a comprehensive parking strategy and a need to address noise impacts on existing and future residents.

Stadium North Lot vicinity

11. Input on land use strategies tended to support a master planning zoning approach that would consider ways to provide regulatory flexibility if it would benefit the future development of the North Lot property.
12. Advisors discussed parking issues but no recommendations were identified.

INTRODUCTION

Susan clarified that the Draft Background Report is a stand-alone document that summarizes zoning, plan contents and physical characteristics of the study area. It is not part of the staff report still to be prepared. Susan noted that traffic analysis will occur as we move forward.

SUB-AREAS ZONING DISCUSSION

Chinatown/L.D. South Edge of Core

Gary Johnson began by asking for advisors' input on possibly more intensive mixed-use development in the southern portion of this core, approximately south of S. Weller Street. He also asked about financial feasibility of wood frame versus concrete construction.

Mixed opinions about higher height limits—but should explore it further

One advisor, a resident of the neighborhood, said high-rise development should not be allowed unless the height limits are "stair-stepped" down from the edges. She doesn't want the district to be dwarfed by high-rises that might have shadow impacts and negatively affect the current good neighborhood scale and character. One other advisor agreed with the stair-stepping approach.

Another advisor took a different position. If the neighborhood wants to take advantage of transit hub proximity and see new opportunities develop in the Dearborn Street vicinity in our lifetime, we should look to encourage denser development—it might create a neighborhood anchor.

Other advisor input:

- It would be useful to know more about potential disparities between the Land Use Code and Building Code, e.g., where might conflicts in these codes artificially constrain what can be achieved. Perhaps with additional information, it would be possible to endorse additional height with two caveats: 1) proper mitigation of shadow impacts, and 2) a set of changes that would not incentivize demolition of historic-contributing buildings. Further, explore arrangements of height limits that will be compatible with this area--play around with the "building blocks" to figure it out.
- An architect confirmed the 85-foot wood frame maximum height (5 floors wood over 3 floors of concrete base), after which building codes and economics favor more permanent and durable forms of construction. Perhaps 5-15 feet of additional height might not make an appreciable difference in economics, but a bit more height would make a difference.
- Future buildings should not be too big and bulky and focused office employee needs, as some perceive the Union Station development. Can we learn anything from that?

Support for residentially-oriented height limits

- Recent infill projects here indicate development feasibility within current zoning, and there are other opportunity sites in this area. In response to Gary's question, this advisor agreed that additional height should prioritize residential use over commercial use.

Support for allowing ground-floor residential uses

- Three advisors expressed support for letting developers decide whether to put residential units on the ground floor, generally endorsing the Vancouver model of units with well-designed relationships to the street (front stoops, landscaping, etc.).

- One was skeptical about the concept, questioning whether residential use would "draw people down the street" the way retail uses do.
- One suggested that requiring retail use everywhere could actually diffuse the overall strength of the retail district. Also, due to flat topography and regular blocks, there would be a perhaps challenging need to fill retail space on all four sides of each block.
- The City's urban design analysis could identify which block faces are more suitable for retail and which for residential use.
- Long-term difficulties of retail uses along Dearborn Street, due to buildings oriented other directions, with little or no retail presence, and the challenging street environment.

Parking

City staff raised the topic of above-grade parking as a possible zoning issue. Screening with other uses is preferred by the advisors. An architect advisor noted it is a complex issue, with need to look at the requirements, bonuses/incentives, and screening requirements.

Japantown Hill (IDR zone)

An advisor with an ongoing development project was asked about lessons learned regarding the IDR zone. He noted two issues: 1) the height limitations of view protections from Kobe Terrace Park; and 2) the transfer of development rights (TDR) issue, where unused TDR are not able to be sold to generate additional revenues that would support housing. Dennis Meier explained that a 2001 rule change was meant to focus TDR on assisting preservation of existing structures and that a housing bonus fund tool was enacted as a sort of balancing measure. He also explained the City's policies on view protection from city parks.

Another advisor noted the topography as a blessing (views) and a curse (impairment of foot traffic). While retail uses would be seen as positive, others noted that retail would not pencil out in certain blocks, and slopes are often difficult to overcome in designing retail spaces. Three other advisors summed up with the thoughts that flat areas west of 6th Avenue are most suitable to support for additional ground-floor retail uses, and that such uses in the right places would aid revitalization. Thus, keeping retail use optional at ground floor in the IDR zone is preferable.

Japantown 4th/5th Avenue vicinity

Support for increased residential densities

The advisors endorsed increased residential densities here, given transit hub proximity, connectivity, and the chance to improve this no-man's land. An increased residential and pedestrian presence would aid safety and connect not only Pioneer Square and Chinatown/I.D., but also the government district in Downtown. The importance of getting high-quality, wider sidewalk environments and streetscape treatments was emphasized by a few advisors, for amenity value and connections with the transit hub.

On height and density topics, no one expressed objections to proposing considerably higher heights in this area. The advisors asked questions seeking to understand the density and bulk implications of various heights. Dennis Meier summarized comparative information about Belltown. The advisors did not offer specific endorsements of any particular height limit.

An advisor noted the crucial benefits of ground-floor retail uses helping to draw people into and through this vicinity. She wants to avoid having an "isolated residential island" in this area.

An advisor noted the difficulties in Seattle's style of talking about these changes but not achieving good results. In contrast, in Portland's Pearl District you sense there is a congruent plan of scale, streetscape, parks, etc. and it works.

One advisor agreed with City staff's idea of extending the IDM zoning to property east of 5th Avenue (with higher than the existing 150-foot IDR zoned heights), because of the additional housing development potential with view amenities. However, two advisors wanted to confirm that affordable-housing-supportive regulatory tools (such as bonuses or incentive zoning) would be part of the solutions. No opinions were expressed about the potential concept of taller buildings higher up on the Japantown Hill, e.g. east of properties bordering 5th Avenue.

One advisor summed up by recommending the City take a hard look at this area. The City should assess how buildings can be designed to fit in, regarding height, bulk and scale, outdoor plazas, exterior character and streetscape realm. She is not sure what the exact prescriptions should be for these elements.

Pioneer Square

Susan McLain moderated the discussion, beginning with a summary of what we've heard to date, and describing the Dept. of Neighborhood's (DON) map of properties that do and do not contribute to the historic character of the neighborhood. Jennifer Meisner of DON explained what contributing and non-contributing buildings/properties are, also indicating it is easier to gain Board approval for demolition of non-contributing buildings. Susan initially mentioned the general support heard previously for the acceptability of housing growth around the edges, more so than within the heart of the district.

Support for growth-around-the-edges concept

All advisors that spoke favored the growth-around-the-edges concept, for a variety of reasons:

- There are not many opportunities in central Pioneer Square for new growth, and most of those lots are small.
- The eastern edge is a lot closer to the transit hub.
- Edge areas could accommodate a greater amount of new residential growth.
- A cluster of new growth would help bring about a critical mass of change that might then create a positive atmosphere that could encourage further infill in central Pioneer Square.
- Only a really large number of new residents would help transform the neighborhood, and that is not likely to happen solely with growth on scattered vacant sites in the central area.
- Given the constrained possibilities in central Pioneer Square, the North Lot in particular is very important to actually achieve a critical mass of new housing.

Need incentive packages for renovations

A developer advisor noted the potential within the existing buildings for renovations, but recommended examining the whole incentive package and whole review process. The City should waive some fee costs (DPD, utilities, etc.) to provide some relief on building code requirements for difficult issues, as well as keeping the current tax credits. An architect advisor

agreed there should be a City strategy for that topic. Another advisor noted that aiding the positive use of upper-floors of buildings is an important topic. Later comments by a developer advisor indicated that structural issues and building code issues are significant and deserve attention, including topics like firewall requirements for upper levels and what is required for safety and seismic upgrades in historic buildings.

Other land use and zoning comments

Regarding land use/zoning strategies, an architect advisor suggested that the City could intentionally create greater capacity with the intent of allowing it to be transferred to other areas of the Downtown. For example, add 30 feet more to the preferred height limit, with the rules for that development right to be only used by transferring it away from Pioneer Square. It comes down to somehow subsidizing the redevelopment of the key parcels of interest.

Regarding potential impacts of additional height, an architect advisor noted a concern that views to the Smith Tower and its skyline prominence not be further compromised by future buildings.

Need for comprehensive parking strategy

An architect advisor said that high water-table elevation is a serious constraint on below-ground parking, which creates significant cost and feasibility issues. Therefore, the City needs a comprehensive parking strategy, perhaps involving centralized parking to serve multiple parcels. As part of the discussion, City staff clarified that existing rules allow for the Board to reduce or waive parking requirements. The comments touched on:

- a parking mitigation fund never activated by the City;
- whether a parking funding strategy could be privatized;
- a parking authority (such as the U-District parking management association, and Merchant's Parking in Chinatown/I.D);
- the difference between demand for parking and the requirements; and
- the difficulties of parking covenants.

A business-representative advisor noted that a significant need to maintain parking for business. The group noted the possibility that future development in existing parking lots would not fully replace the existing available parking, or would only for the use of new residents. (See also the parking-related comments in the stadium North Lot discussion.)

Noise

An advisor who lives in the neighborhood noted that we should carefully consider where to encourage residential, given the severe noise problem from roaring motorcycles and clubs. This is very frustrating and creates unlivable conditions. The character and aesthetic concerns are so very important. There must be ways to gain that support from the City and police to help define this as a residential neighborhood that deserves effective noise and public safety protection. In the past, police have dismissed her noise complaints. (Gary Johnson noted he would pass along her noise concerns to the Executive.)

Stadium North Lot

Gary Johnson described the status of King County's process, including the preference for residential-oriented development with key commercial uses such as a grocery, dry cleaner and

perhaps a hotel. He noted the County Executive's support for high-quality and eye-catching urban design on this property. He noted an advisor's earlier comment that "the City should do everything possible to encourage considerable housing growth" on this property. He asked "what kind of flexibility does the community support?"

A majority of the discussion focused on the relevance of the North Lot's parking supply:

- does North Lot parking support existing office uses and small business;
- will there be unintended consequences of impacts on businesses;
- how does development here relate to other neighborhood plan ideas for additional neighborhood parking;
- is it a good idea to reduce our overall dependence on parking as a City policy choice.

However, the final commenter on parking said that she did not see a parking issue to be decided at this location, given the stadium's prescription to replace all the existing parking.

An architect advisor suggested that on the North Lot (like other edge areas) could be a good site for much higher towers, perhaps to 300 feet, with limited base heights. That could help facilitate good designs and provision of housing.

Responding to Gary's question about master planning (defined in zoning as "planned community development"—PCDs), Dennis Meier noted several possible options for customized regulations, depending on what is wanted. The PCD approach allows flexibility, tailored to achieve defined public objectives. Building massing and view corridors are two possible flexibility topics.

Responding to Dennis, one advisor noted she thinks the PCD is the only way that development plans will be successful on the North Lot. There needs to be a process to define those important public goals and objectives, as to numbers of units, amount and type of retail use, the types of flexibility in height and parking, etc.

In later comments, one advisor recommended approaches that would ensure that the character of architecture on uses within the North Lot is varied enough so that it does not have the feel of a planned development with a single type of character.

Other Comments

One advisor asked about long-term plans for the newly-opened northbound lane on 5th Avenue from Jackson to Washington. He feels this connection has negative effects on pedestrian safety due to two-direction traffic and increased traffic. A transit representative noted this is a measure to assist additional bus traffic resulting from tunnel closure, but that future transportation projects such as the Viaduct replacement may also dictate keeping that lane indefinitely.

One advisor advocated for discussing how to support arts and culture in these areas, given their prominence in the life of the neighborhoods. City staff agreed that is an important topic.

Regarding Pioneer Square, an advisor noted the past loss of upper floors on several buildings, due to earthquake concerns. The City could incentivize restoration of such buildings.

Public Comments

John Chaney, Historic Seattle, made the following points:

- Within central Pioneer Square, there now aren't many sites that aren't already remodeled, meaning not as many opportunities for rehabs as in the past.
- Over past decades there has been a symbiotic relationship between low-cost parking at the North Lot and office uses. This has perhaps discouraged housing in upper floors of buildings in the Occidental vicinity, which had good residential use potential.
- The biggest sites at the edges of Pioneer Square really are the most important growth opportunities. The over-tracks site does provide a good opportunity for development in an area with a possibly different height scale than the rest of the neighborhood.
- Protecting the Smith Tower views is an important issue. The City should do modeling that determines at a fine grain where additional height would be best suited.
- The Vancouver model of residential development at street level within a building base is a good one to study for parts of this area, and is preferable to the bulk arrangement of buildings in Belltown.
- Looking into the possible symbiotic relationship of William Justen's housing projects with the Butler Garage could provide clues as to parking strategies for residential use.
- The City should consider what mechanisms could work regarding overall parking strategy. For example, the Pike Place Market garage's bonding by the City was a successful approach.
- It would be good to infill the few vacant sites in central Pioneer Square. However, we should recognize the huge returns those parking uses currently get. Therefore, the economics of encouraging redevelopment of those parcels is tough. You won't get there using normal market-incentive strategies. Perhaps the City can help find a solution.
- The City has not provided the consistency of enforcement and dedication to civility on topics like noise, social services, and public safety, so there is a lot of uncertainty about how those will be dealt with.
- The City should identify constraints in building codes compared to what is possible in zoning. Identify what will be possible within the constraints of the codes, and go with it. The City can provide leadership in identifying how those codes can work together.

Ken Katahira, InterIm, made the following points:

- Has there been discussion about the intended end product of all these changes—and who will be living in the new housing, and how that is worked into the strategy?
- The TDR capability from new buildings was taken away, and that was a blow that took away possible financial resources that would have further supported housing. Shouldn't the City take a bigger picture look at figuring out the goals for unit production and the mix of strategies that will get us there?
- There should be a relationship drawn between this planning effort's outcome and what is identified for housing in the City's Comprehensive Plan and the Consolidated Plan.

An advisor agreed with Ken's thoughts, saying that the City should include sufficient policy statements that would support and reinforce the purposes of the zone changes, so they are not evaluated in a vacuum.